



The beginner's guide to customer engagement

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Roll up! Roll up! How can your business build a large, active audience enthusiastic about your brand and then convert them into customers? Jonathan Crossfield looks at the technology that can help your business engage.

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Introduction

A business attempting to dictate customer behaviour may as well try herding cats. Customers will decide for themselves exactly how they will behave and whether or not to choose your business, your products or your website, thank you very much. Wouldn't you?

The title of this article – customer engagement – is a bit of a fudge. Engagement needs to happen before they become a customer. A person needs to have made a decision to listen to your message before it will get through. We choose which emails to open and which to delete. We choose which channel to watch and when to skip the ads. We choose which links to click on in Google and which to scroll past.

Too often, a business will design a campaign in expectation of a specific response only to grow frustrated as everyone chooses to avoid the link or misinterpret the webpage or – quite frankly – not be as impressed as you told them they should be.

So how does one business attract thousands of loyal, happy and active customers while another remains forgotten and unloved – or worse, criticised and hated? The simple answer is that the first company understands how the customer has the power in the relationship and is happy to listen.

By engaging the right audience, interacting with them and allowing that audience to grow – unrestricted - as large as possible, you have the best platform from which to convert customers.

This is not just about the trendy social networks like Twitter and Facebook. They are

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just one small tool in a bigger engagement strategy. This approach should inform your entire business, from the website to your marketing and even your offline activities like customer service and traditional advertising.

Customer-friendly web design

A customer-focused strategy starts where it ends – the website.

Ever been to a website where you couldn't find what you were looking for? It's a common failing – and big business isn't immune. Often, a website is launched to tick off that 21st century must-have from the last board meeting, with little regard to whether the site genuinely adds value to the customer.

In web design, there is a five second rule. When clicking through Google results in search of a product or solution, a person will, on average, scan a page for five seconds before deciding to read on, or click back for the next link.

This may seem obvious to us when we look at websites with a customer's eye, but we have all had experiences of sites that confuse, confound and annoy by failing to serve us in the way we expect: Frequently Asked Questions pages that don't actually answer anything worthwhile - purchasing processes that are complex and buried – confusing copy that requires effort and time to extract the pertinent points. Make sure your website isn't guilty of the same failings.

A website should always – always – be designed from the customer's point of view. It doesn't matter that you want to shout out how great your business is if that statement doesn't answer a specific consumer need. Does the home page explain – clearly and briefly – how a customer can benefit by choosing you or your products? Is the navigation of the site simple and intuitive

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to anyone regardless of their skill level? You may be able to interpret the trendy menu bar and jargon – after all, you dreamt it up - but could your mum find her way around the site without help? Your neighbour? Your ideal customer?

Don't make your audience struggle to decipher your site - they won't do homework. Don't sacrifice usability and simplicity for style and special effects – they won't impress. With Google just a click away, they will simply find a website that speaks to them quickly and plainly instead and gets the job done.

Most website mistakes are caused by inexperience. If you are at all unsure how to tailor a website to a customer's needs, call in the experts. Without a decent website, no amount of engagement is going to convert visitors into customers.

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Building trust

Trust is one of the biggest deciders for a potential customer when choosing whether to buy from you or the competition. Will the item arrive in the post as promised? What happens if it is broken or doesn't do what I require? How protected am I from fraud or bad service? How reputable is the business?

The latest Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey, published in July 2009, surveyed consumers to determine the factors that created trust with a brand. By far the greatest influence on trust – with 90% - was word of mouth from a known contact. Yet, in equal second place at 70%, were "Consumer opinions posted online" and "Brand websites". (fig 1)

You can tap into word of mouth and consumer opinions with little effort from yourself. Consumer reviews on your site become a form of user generated content (UGC), allowing you to benefit from the content provided by your audience. These reviews or snippets of feedback create trust and reduce risk for customers, potentially converting more readers.

You may need to moderate feedback to remove particularly offensive posts and there is certainly no guarantee that all the reviews will be good. However, if one of your products or services resulted in feedback that was critical and negative, why would you continue selling it? Such feedback could provide useful insight into which products you should be selling or how to improve your offers, resulting in better feedback in future. No one knows how to improve your products better than your customers.

If you do choose to allow publicly available customer feedback on your website, resist the temptation to approve all the positive comments and restrict the negative ones. Trying to control the conversation quickly destroys trust. You need to approach customer engagement

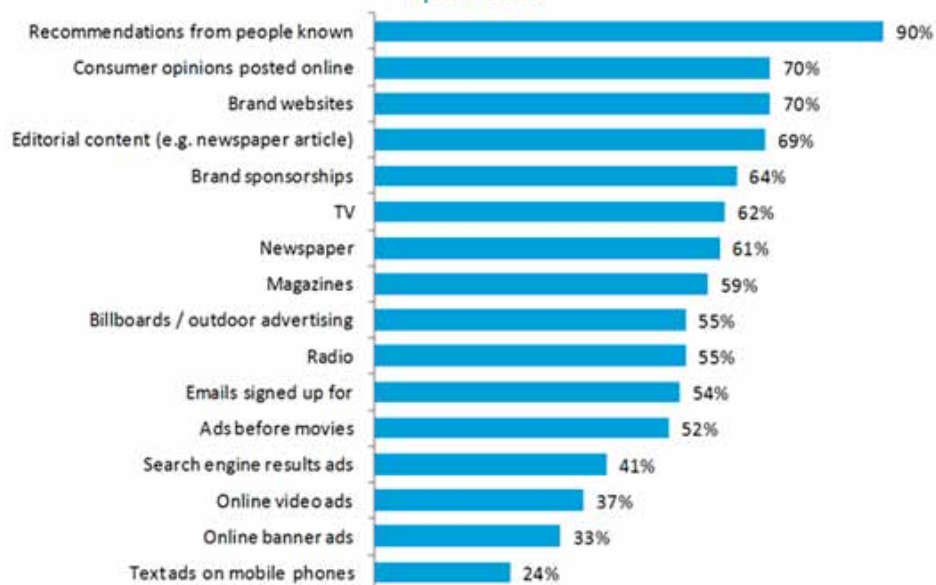
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honestly, publicly and with humility. Mistakes and imperfection are only human. No one trusts a company that hides criticism or mistakes behind a wall of arrogance.

By demonstrating that you accept and respond to criticisms, customers will trust you even more. They will know that their needs and opinions are taken seriously and that you genuinely strive to provide them with the best possible solution. This is a true customer relationship.

Have some degree of trust* in the following forms of advertising April 2009



Source: The Nielsen Company

Fig 1 *E.g. 90 percent of respondents trusted "completely" or "somewhat" recommendations from people they know

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Adding the human touch with video

We all respond differently to a friendly face than to an inanimate object (or text). It provides a human connection instead of merely clicking buttons on the machine.

Video tutorials, testimonials and user guides are extremely popular with an audience looking for easily digestible content, allowing you to provide different content that appeals to various user preferences. Some people prefer to learn by reading, others through demonstration (something video does very well). Your website can easily cater for both of these preferences, engaging more users in the way they feel most comfortable.

Watching a testimonial from a previous customer can also be more personal and persuasive than reading a review. It brings that transaction and opinion to life. Importantly, video adds friendly faces and voices to your website, humanising the experience and breaking the sterile, machine environment. But you can take this idea even further.

When you enter a shop, a helpful assistant can point you to the right aisle or shelf to find a product and guide you to the best choices. Your website can now use video to create that same welcoming feel and personal touch.

A video 'assistant' can be programmed to appear when triggered by certain actions to help a potential customer find what they want in a friendly manner. For example, one can be created to run automatically if someone arrives at your site from a particular Google search. Because of the keywords of their search, you already know what their interest is. Therefore, the video presenter can answer that need specifically, providing focused customer service and guiding them to a sale.

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Such video presenters can be programmed to appear only the first time someone visits, or to start when someone hits a help button, or any number of specific actions. This avoids customers being 'pestered' by these videos when they don't need help, maintaining a positive experience.

Show me the money! Part 1

US agency Converseon analysed the social media strategy of Lion Brand Yarn, a wool company servicing knitters and crochet lovers for over a century. The LBY case study demonstrated that any company with a passionate customer base can generate real financial returns by merely engaging with them online.

The results of the study showed that visitors to the website via the blog or another social media channel were 83% more likely to convert into sales. That increase in sales more than justified the expense and resources used in the strategy.

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Social media and blogging

In recent years, social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace have been trumpeted as the future of online marketing. Sorry, but true engagement isn't quite as simple as opening a Twitter account, posting your latest offer and counting the number of people who click the link.

There are a number of ways of inviting an open dialogue with an audience. Blogs, bulletin boards, wikis and others are all online tools that can be sourced cheaply or for free from open source providers, but allow a genuine two-way dialogue with users.

Blogging has evolved into the easiest way to produce valuable and engaging content on your website that invites readers to respond. But it is a lot more than just slapping your latest press release into WordPress (the most popular blogging application) and hitting submit. Actually, a good business blog should sound as casual and un-corporate as possible. If your blog has to be approved by five departments and vetted by management before it can go live, it is never going to sound like the genuine voice of the company willing to have an open and honest dialogue with its customers.

All blogs should have a facility for readers to enter comments. Some businesses have decided it is safer to moderate out anything even slightly critical or remove the comments feature entirely to prevent readers leaving negative criticism visible on the website. But, as with consumer reviews, why would anyone trust what you have to say when you don't want to listen?

Blogs work exceptionally well as the centre of a web of social media opportunities; such as Twitter and Facebook. The right content shared in these networks can be championed and supported by your audience. Every time someone else says "look at this" and shares a link to your blog, you have created engagement and reached extra readers for free and many blogs have inbuilt tools to encourage just this sort of behaviour.

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As with all engagement tools, you can't just spam readers with links. Ideally, your audience will spread them for you. If you do adopt Twitter and other social strategies, you will need to actively engage, listen and respond to your customers in these spaces. The more engaged they are the more likely

they will share what you have to say – including your blog.

The easy part is setting up a blog. With so many blog platforms around, such as WordPress and Movable Type, and web based blogging tools such as Blogger and Typepad, almost anyone can launch a blog quickly. But if you want your blog to make a lasting impression, it is worth investing a little money in hiring someone to create a unique, branded template. If you want to look professional and viable, you don't want to blog using the default templates that come with these platforms.

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Measuring engagement

There are numerous tools available to help businesses monitor the millions of conversations on the web, using keyword identification to find those mentions most relevant to you. By monitoring negative, neutral and positive mentions, you can set goals on the amount of conversation your brand sparks as well as improving the nature of those comments. By coupling these results with any changes in buying behaviour, you can soon establish whether your campaigns are influencing customers.

These tools also allow you to plan your time accordingly. No need to constantly log in and out of the various networks searching for conversations, the tools bring them to you and notify you when there is something worthy of attention. A well planned strategy doesn't need to be time-consuming.

The secret with all engagement tools - social networks, blogs, even feedback on your website - is remembering that they are a two-way communication medium. True customer engagement allows immediate response and feedback, creating genuine conversations that can shape and adjust your message – and even your business. One consumer can now broadcast their message to thousands of 'followers' with one click, making online word of mouth insanely powerful. The audience is no longer passive and can sometimes be even more powerful and influential than your own communications.

By engaging with your customers with well-constructed, responsive content, you can start to turn neutral customers into positive word of mouth and powerful advocates for your brand.

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Show me the money! Part 2

In July, Altimeter and Wetpaint released a comprehensive report into engagement marketing. (www.engagementdb.com) the report draws a correlation between social media engagement and increased financial performance. The most active brands in engaging with customers saw performance increase 18% over the last 12 months. Alternatively, the least active saw performance decrease by 5%.

Customer engagement tools from Netregistry

Web Design: Call for a FREE quote

- Hundreds of templates to choose from
- Simple to use and update
- Numerous features to add and enhance your site (fees apply)

Wordpress: FREE

- WordPress is a free third-party blogging platform
- You will need a dynamic hosting account, such as Netregistry's Business Hosting (\$29.95 per month)
- Netregistry can also install, tailor and design your blog for \$199

Netregistry.com.au has everything you need for every stage of your online business. With lower prices and easy services designed for the average business owner, you can be in control.

Call **1800 788 082** to let your ideas loose.

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